REVISITING THE USE OF ROLE PLAY IN DEVELOPING THE SPEAKING SKILLS OF TERTIARY LEVEL LEARNERS

M. SHYAMALA BHARATHY[1] & T. SHRIMATHY VENKATALAKSHMI[2]

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of English, SSN Engineering College, Kalavakkam, Tamil Nadu, India

[2]Associate Professor, Department of English, Anna University, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

The changeover from the existing methodology of talk and chalk approach for language acquisition to technology driven approaches in the educational setup is recommended for improving language skills especially speaking skills. Though technical skills are important for engineers, a diagnostic test is conducted on speaking in English for the purpose of placement at the tertiary level. Recruiters expect candidates to possess excellent communication skills to adapt to international scenario. Therefore communication skills laboratory was introduced to enable task based language learning in order to equip students with the required speaking skills. It is rightly pointed out by Byron Gong "Although task-based approaches still need much investigation both theoretically and empirically, it is believed that a task-oriented approach is a valid assessment of the productive communicative ability of the test taker" Gong 2008. And moreover the need of the hour is to establish a comfortable and low-threat learning environment which provides less anxious and more relaxed ambience for a better acquisition of the language skills. Therefore the present paper aims to discusses the importance of speaking skills for the technical students and brings forth an analytical perception of how role play emerges as a successful task based learning for improving all the four skills.

KEYWORDS: Improving Speaking Skills, Diagnostic Test on Speaking in English

INTRODUCTION

Significance of Introducing Technical English

The teaching of English at the tertiary level in India is beset with a host of problems that do not seem to have disappeared or even been remotely tackled by all the stakeholders in the field of education. Successive education commissions starting with the first one in 1948 (the Radhakrishnan Commission) have put forth recommendations which if they had been followed with single- mindedness the country could have rid itself of the problems that continue to plague from the time of independence.

A very basic and fundamental aspect of education, the class size and structure of the classroom have not been solved. Michael West's (1960) description of the unfavourable conditions in a typical Indian school classroom continues to represent most classrooms at the tertiary level in modern India, "By unfavourable conditions' we mean a class consisting of over 30 pupils (usually 40 or even 50) sitting on congested benches (not sitting at individual or dual desks) accommodated in an unsuitably shaped room."

The teaching of English in India, at all levels, be it elementary, secondary or tertiary level today to a large extent is decided more by political will than by academics, ELT practitioners and other stakeholders in the field of education.

The language laboratory is one such which when first introduced in the mid eighties did not receive nor did the establishment of language laboratories in schools and colleges have the political reaction that it enjoys today. The resurgence in the introduction of the language laboratory in schools and colleges in Tamilnadu happened in the late nineties, it was done with renewed rigor and urgency and all schools especially the state board schools were sanctioned funds for the setting up of the language laboratory. In colleges across the state, (both arts and science colleges and engineering institutions) the language laboratory has metamorphosed into a 'communication' laboratory, and in some places into self access language learning centers. The setting up of language laboratories in all engineering colleges in the state was done primarily with the intention of developing the speaking and listening skill in English of engineering students. The English language course that is offered to the students in the fifth and sixth semesters is a lab- based course and the syllabus is to a large extent been designed in a way that allows for greater practice of speaking and listening in the lab.

As stated earlier, the setting up of the language laboratories in engineering institutions across the state could have been political but the language laboratory has definitely helped students especially those from needless state, mother tongue medium schools. The language laboratory has been instrumental in helping these students shed their shyness and inhibitions and in a country like India where over three- fourths of the population continues to live in dire poverty the ambience of the language laboratory with its air conditioned environment has meant that these students look forward with anticipation and give their best by participating enthusiastically in the activities that the language teacher designs for them.

Technical English for engineers was introduced by Anna university for the undergraduate learners of BE/ B. Tech degree program in the first year of the study and tested in first and second end-semester examination. The purpose of introducing the course was to improve their communicative competence in the workplace. The focus of the course design was to equip the students in all the four language skills (LSRW) to meet the professional demands and also to inculcate interpersonal communication skills in English. But over the years, though the syllabus had all the four language skills, the testing was and is done only on reading and writing. Students are equipped in the knowledge of grammar, writing letters, giving instructions, suggesting recommendations etc...Due to the mushrooming of the IT and ITes sector in India, there was a pressing need to equip the student in the spoken language.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS LABORATORY

Therefore, in 2006, Anna university, made communication skills mandatory in the third year of study. The Communication skills laboratory had to be equipped with systems with the required configuration, Hi-class software, LCD projectors, mike, video camera and a TV. The lab was divided as English lab and Career lab wherein the English lab has the lab sessions and the career lab has sessions on presentations and group discussions. Testing is done in the end of the semester with the English lab component comprising of reading, listening and common errors in English. Speaking skills are tested in the Career lab.   The syllabus copy is annexed for reference.

In the language laboratory, using software Globarena and Toefl mastery, reading, listening exercises, phonetics, intonation, stress pattern are taught. In the career lab, students are trained in presentation, group discussion and interview skills to face the future demands of the prospective employment. The curriculum also comprises certain task-based usage of language to improvise the students oral skills and social skills, and it has also proved successful in real time practices. It encourages primarily appropriate completion of real world tasks rather than on accuracy of prescribed language forms.

Wigglesworth (2008;117) an ELT specialist also has expressed the same views with regard to task based teaching and testing of English language skills "A central tenet of task-based language assessments is that the tasks are designed to represent authentic activities which test candidates might be expected to encounter in the real world outside the classroom."

Related Review

In the article "Role play in science teaching and learning" by Mcsharry et.al, the author reveals how role play is the product of the three components like play, games, simulations resulting in learning outcomes when the student is made to perform in his/her classrooms.

He also emphasizes the fact that role plays could be the best form of experiential learning if they are initiated and designed by the teacher in science education. The general misconception that role plays cannot be used to educate scientific concepts is strongly disagreed by the author. He says the desire to play and therefore to learn is a fundamental part of a human psychology and is a potentially powerful resource residing in the children themselves (Mcsharey et al)

The reason behind this suggestions to employ role play in science classes are as follows:

- It evolves our learners and students to give a feeling of 'ownership' of their education as he involves himself in facilitating his own education by writing a script to the role play or improvise the existing model etc., for instance description of the way the planets revolves around the sun etc.,

- He recommends the ideology of Watson (1985) that it helps the teacher a good option of linking... the work with the more feeling, creative side of education and as a method of increasing the manipulation of factual material by children.

- It acts as a platform to teach about moral or ethical values or issues arising from the curriculum like conducting debates on genetically manipulated food production or the arguments for/against opening up a new quarry in the schools' playing field.

- Giving a chance to experience certain situations of loaded theories comprising complicated scientific ideas in a physical way which may be more appropriate to their personal learning style.

- As more the technique/analogy is used in explaining the concepts children end up conceptualizing their ideas and thereby resulting in the highest degree/form of learning.

Unless the teaching methodology embraces a wide variety of techniques any pupil/student whose style does not match is likely to be disadvantage. (Lawrence, 1997)

In the article "New approaches to role play in the communication classroom" by Paul Mason, the author brings out the benefits of psychological and recreational effects of using role plays in classrooms and further believes that by immersion or involving the students wholly in their roles results in a heightened sense of concentration thereby creating an environment of greater involvement and motivation in acquiring the comprehensible input of learning a language. He also suggests that a teacher can engage himself/herself in a best interactive situation when she changes her role to a referee and guide them in all the paths to bring a good teaching and learning experience to her students.

To make a real success the author suggests that if students the author suggests that if students are provided with the context where they could be imaginative, more freedom of play rather than prosaic and uninvolving topics every role play would turn out to be a yield of greater reward.

In the paper " Role play in English language Teaching" by liu and et.al, the author reemphasizes the fact that by employing role plays in as an activity our classroom could bring a great change in the teaching and learning process. He states that if it is one of effecting strategy to animate the task of language acquisition in the regular English classroom and further the author tries to arrive at a concrete solution to the various issues raised by researches in the analysis of proving role plays to be the best communicating language teaching method. He brings out some of the best results he has experimented in his research while practicing role play they are as follows Vocabulary is best learnt and applied while performing role plays compared to a single practice of recitation

- Grammar is not Considered the ultimate result of language production but a good language is expected to elicit and bring forth the real life like dialogues with a pattern of sentences like exclamation, elliptical forms interrogatives etc.

- More than 80% of the students could fluently talk and in act in the role play with lot of insight into the appropriate language properties combined with their imaginations and intelligence.

- A well arranged discussion was plausible as the students observed others perform and proffered feedbacks and thereby was able to share their opinions and appreciations.

As a conclusion, the author suggest four steps to make a successful outcome in any activity based English classrooms. They are

- The teacher should take the effort to portray the real life situation in the given activity.

- At the appropriate situation the teacher should step in to guide her pupils while doing the role play.

- In a gentle but at the right junctures he/she should interrupt and correct mistakes and errors after observation.

- She has to take the role of a facilitator, spectator or sometimes to initiate, to involve, to bring life onto the drama and therefore the students could participate enthusiastically taking up a role and perform.

TASK BASED LEARNING (TBL)

Before going into the topic of the task based approach, let us discuss what a task based approach can be well defined for a better understanding. Nunan (1989) states task based approach as "A piece of classroom work Which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form." And another ELT specialist (Gong 2008) defines task as a type of speaking test involving performance in a test of productive skills, whose main purpose is to elicit an examinees (English language ability. And further he states a task refers to a given topic that an examinee is expected to talk about so that his/her language ability, rather than the completion of the actual task itself, can be assessed."

Task Based Learning is effective for communication language teaching. It is contrary to the teacher centered approach wherein the student is left with no choices other than an artificial situation, often with drills and already structured dialogues to be practiced .In the Indian scenario TBL is an upcoming new element as it is becoming popular and

has garnered considerable changes in the teaching methodology. The concept has also influenced syllabus designing, classroom teaching and in the assessment of learners. TBL is practiced in school classrooms as well as in colleges. The most important criteria aiding in TBL is learner-centered and also fun to learn.

Nunan (2004) tries to enumerate some of the key factors in his book task based language teaching. He deems that TBL is ideal for selecting content for a need based language as there is emphasis on 'learning to communicate through interaction in the target language' and 'introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation'. TBL offers 'provisions of opportunities for learners' and 'provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself'. It acknowledges 'enhancement of the learners own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning' and linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom (Nunan, 2004).

Some of the components of TBL are:

- Setting goals and objective to develop communicative ability of the learner.

- Input is rendered by teacher by giving a sketch of how things should be approached and selected for performance.

- Activation -children get themselves to undergo rehearsals and regressive practice.

- Teachers take different roles unlike traditional ones and thus act as good guide, counselor, evaluator etc.

- Learners role differ from his routine self and thus act as a independent learner, material and course designer, self evaluator, peer advisor etc...

- Settings - creating an infrastructure with all the equipment like hi-class software, LCD projector, and a comfortable ambience of an air-conditioned room where the student can work towards a better goal of achieving efficiency in their language skills. Subsequently in the language laboratory the researcher observed and found that of all activities and TBL like GD, Jam, debate, miming etc, role play emerged as one of the effective task, that could support not only linguistic competence of the language learner but also develop communicative ability of the learners.

ROLE-PLAY

Role play is a teaching strategy that fits within the social family of models (Joyce and Weil, 2000). Role play advocates a natural method which recommends a process of learners discovery through trial and error. The ultimate goal achievement in acquiring language proficiency and fluency is supported. Here the researcher would like to bring forth Krashen's (1987) theory of language acquisition called comprehensible input (i+) where it is expected that the four kills are supportive to combine the existing knowledge in the learner and eventually results in the understanding of the target language.

The benefits of using a role play are innumerable and fruitful. Firstly the reader is exposed to true learning where he is not made a passive observer but an active participant. According to Jones (1982) "students must accept the duties and responsibilities of their roles and functions and do the best they can in the situation in which they find themselves". It helps the learner bring life to the written forms and immediacy to academic material which most of the time lies in the form of theory and not utilized for any practical. It can encourage student to empathize with the position and feelings of others which is in fact missed in the normal course of a teaching learning environment.

Role-play enhances clarity in understanding, interest to participate and confidence to perform in students. It helps learners to empathize with the role he/she enacts and thus motivates the learner to have a better understanding of real-time problems and the solutions. It helps students practice speaking skills like debating, enacting, reasoning and negotiating. Moreover it also helps them to adapt to unexpected situations in real-life. As Lucantoni (2002) points out, "role play can be a very enjoyable for learners and provide excellent opportunities for using language in real life situations. It is a communicative activity where the learners can use spontaneous language .It also helps learners to develop real life speaking skills.

The aim of introducing role play to the students was to promote LSRW skills and also to actively involve students in speaking. The class was a mixed group who were divided into teams of six. Ments (1999) pointed out "role play lends well to mixed ability groups and that it provides learners with opportunities to practice and develop communication strategies". The students were selected randomly for each group. Each group consisted of good, average and below average student.

The students were allowed to choose a topic of their own choice from a broader frame work. One such activity the teacher suggested was a letter writing exercise depicting an incident that which takes place in day-to-day life. This idea of giving appropriate activity for the students was taken from Cameron's concept. He points out that similar to any learning method the choice of the role play must be "appropriate for the children's age and social –cultural experience" (Cameron, 2001:30). The letter had to be addressed to the editor of a newspaper either voicing their opinion over the issue or complaining about the issue

The students were allowed to browse through resources like magazines, online news reports, etc... as a pre-task activity. The students were asked to come prepared for a discussion and present their views in the next class. In the last class the students enacted the entire issue as a skit thereby enabling participation from all students. Each student had a role to play and based on the preparation and discussion of the social issue, the students actively participated in enacting the role-play. Each team had to present the skit for a duration of 15 minutes. After the skit is enacted, the floor is thrown open to the audience for discussions or queries that arises. The feedback is given immediately both by the teacher and the other students as peer feedback. The final written script of the skit is submitted for analysis.

The activity is extremely gripping and enjoyable as the students have total involvement. The activity adheres and supports the ideology of natural approach wherein a great way to practice conversation skills is to collaborate students to solve a problem or complete an assigned task. There is a meaningful exposure to all the four skills (speaking was primary as it was dominant skill posted at every stage). Krashens language learning acquisition theory believe that combined input of all the four skills of both productive and receptive skills would help them acquire better understanding and promote them with effective communication to target any kind of testing and evaluation in academic as well as real time situation and issues. These activities enable the students to be part of the reviewing team thereby giving instant peer feedback and opinions that do not affect the morale of the student.

As a part of sourcing ideas the students watch television, watch video clippings in you-tubes and listen to music CD. Thus the students are given opportunity to be more responsible to make their own decision thereby encouraging self-directed program rather than teacher directed learning by choosing their own content from the available resources. The ultimate step and goal is to enable every learner become responsible for their own learning which is highly reflected in establishing self access language learning written by Gardner and Miller (1999). Reading skill is exercised as they read

materials relevant to the context(print material, online material). They also read their own scripts before submitting to the teacher (proof-reading), they also read the scripts of other groups (peer assessment). These help the student to be a good critic, assign new roles and give them the opportunity to self-monitor their own performance as well as the others.

Last but not the least they had to write and express their original ideas on the concept area on a specialized form of writing on a literary genre (namely dialogue writing, play writing etc.) and using all the ideas generated they wrote letters to the editor about the issues they had enacted.

Materials

They were allowed to access the net in the language laboratory.

Theory underlying this research is Krashens (c=i+1) ideology of bringing the concept of comprehensible input (1987). The role-play enables that learning is fun and performance leads to improved spoken skills.

DRAWBACKS OF ROLE-PLAY

In spite of identifying a very good feedback observation from students about the positive end of using a role play, we can never deny some factual and draw factors of the disadvantages in involving the role play in teaching learning environment.

- Sometimes learners become very self conscious and end up in an embarrassing situation feeling awkward and results in unproductive performance .As Thornbury (2005) points out "There are learners who feel self conscious performing in front of their peers…and care has to be exercised in choosing and setting up such activities."

- It is practically difficult in a larger classroom of 60 to have role play and assess the role-play.

- Sometimes there are passive listeners and as a result a disinterested group distracts the class and stops paying attention to the environment.

- If more students are involved, the role playing might become a chaotic mess.

- Adequate teachers support and human power is required to bring forth better guidance and support to assist the learners.

- Teachers should be given training programs to equip them self with the required skills in facilitating a congealing environment and guidance to move the learners for further progress.

- The concept of learners attorney is sometimes quite shocking and continues to be a surprise for the learners and teachers to accept and probably they end up questioning the legitimacy of the program that differs totally from the conventional methodology.

CONCLUSIONS

The famous quotation by Benjamin Franklin states, "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn." As similar to the quoted message, it is the felt need of all the teachers to bring in a new path for learning a language by involving the student in a performance. It creates not only fun and happiness, but also a huge amount of language production. Therefore it is recommended that a whole lot of activities like role-plays must be incorporated in our regular classrooms that gives us a great experience with an output of all the four skills. Theory underlying this research is

Krashens (c=i+1) ideology of bringing the concept of comprehensible input (1987). The role-play enables that learning is fun and performance leads to improved spoken skills.

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APPENDIX 1

Syllabus

Communication Skills Laboratory

GE2321 COMMUNICATION SKILLS LABORATORY L T P C

Globalization has brought in numerous opportunities for the teeming millions, with more focus on the students'

overall capability apart from academic competence. Many students, particularly those from non-English medium schools, find that they are not preferred due to their inadequacy of communication skills and soft skills, despite possessing sound knowledge in their subject area along with technical capability. Keeping in view their pre- employment needs and career requirements, this course on Communication Skills Laboratory will prepare students to adapt themselves with ease to the industry environment, thus rendering them as prospective assets to industries. The course will equip the students with the necessary communication skills that would go a long way in helping them in their profession.

OBJECTIVES

- To equip students of engineering and technology with effective speaking and listening skills in English.

- To help them develop their soft skills and interpersonal skills, which will make the transition from college to workplace smoother and help them excel in their job.

- To enhance the performance of students at Placement Interviews, Group Discussions and other recruitment exercises.

I. PC BASED SESSION (WEIGHTAGE 40%) 24 PERIODS
A. ENGLISH LANGUAGE LAB
1. LISTENING COMPREHENSION   (18 PERIODS)   (6)

Listening and typing – Listening and sequencing of sentences – Filling in the blanks - Listening and answering questions.

2. READING COMPREHENSION   (6)

Filling in the blanks - Close exercises – Vocabulary building - Reading and answering questions.

3. SPEAKING   (6)

Phonetics: Intonation – Ear training - Correct Pronunciation – Sound recognition exercises– Common Errors in English.

Conversations: Face to Face Conversation – Telephone conversation – Role play activities (Students take on roles and engage in conversation)

B. DISCUSSION OF AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIALS (6 PERIODS)

(Samples are available to learn and practice)

1. RESUME / REPORT PREPARATION / LETTER WRITING   (1)

Structuring the resume / report - Letter writing / Email Communication - Samples.

2. PRESENTATION SKILLS   (1)

Elements of effective presentation – Structure of presentation - Presentation tools– Voice Modulation – Audience analysis - Body language – Video samples

3. SOFT SKILLS   (2)

Time management – Articulateness – Assertiveness – Psychometrics – Innovation and Creativity - Stress Management & Poise - Video Samples

4. GROUP DISCUSSION   (1)

Why is GD part of selection process ? - Structure of GD – Moderator – Ied and other GDs - Strategies in GD – Team work - Body Language - Mock GD -Video sampIes

5. INTERVIEW SKILLS   (1)

Kinds of interviews – Required Key Skills – Corporate culture – Mock interviews- Video samples.

II. PRACTICE SESSION (WEIGHTAGE – 60%) 24 PERIODS

1. **Resume / Report Preparation / Letter Writing:** Students prepare their own resume and report.   (2)

2. **Presentation Skills:** Students make presentations on given topics.   (8)

3. **Group Discussion:** Students participate in group discussions.   (6)

4. **Interview Skills:** Students participate in Mock Interviews   (8)

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LAB REQUIREMENTS

- Teacher console and systems for students.

- English Language Lab Software

- Career Lab Software

Appendix-2

Skit (sample)

Scene 1: (At the outskirts of the village, in the middle of the night)

Man: If you agree to this deal, I can promise you a handsome reward of 10 lakhs.

Village Head: I will not accept this! I'm not one who falls for bribery!

Man: Not even for 30 lakhs?

Village Head: Never! I am a man of principles! And I will not........

Man: 50?

Village Head: Money will not........

Man: 60?

Village Head: (Pauses)......well maybe.........No!

Man: How about 65 then?

Village Head: Well......... it is for the good of the village........ I will take it.

Man: Well then its settled you will get your money and you know what you have to do in return. Right?

Village Head: Of course, Of course. It shall be done. you need not worry.

Man: I will see you tomorrow then....... Pleasure doing business with you.(They exit the scene)

<div align="center">

Scene 2 (At the Village, the Next Morning)

</div>

A man appears and interrupts the villagers' daily routine with an announcement.

Assistant: Gather Round....gather round everyone! I have an important announcement to make.I am from the dash car industries and our boss Mr. Bhandari has come to visit your village. We intend to establish our car manufacturing factory here. People look around and talk among themselves surprised.

Boss: My dear people, the upcoming of this factory will develop your village in ways you could not possibly dream of. We can provide employment opportunities, give you constant supply of electricity and fuel sources. We will also give you a handsome amount of money as compensation. All this in return for your co-operation.

Village Hero: This is ABSURD! You think you can just walk in here and ask us to sacrifice our village in return for a handsome amount of money! My friends, do not listen to this man. He is one who drains and destroys our Mother Nature with his money. Right now he says he will give us employment, energy and money. But I can assure you all of this is a farce. If we, agree to his deal we have everything to lose.

Boss: No No...... it's not what you think. This upcoming factory will not destroy your village at all. In fact, this factory will be a blessing to your village. You will all make plenty of money working at the factory. This factory could potentially convert your village into a mini city. Following our success, some more factories will come up here. More people will come to live in the villages. More schools, hospitals and residential areas will come up here. Haven't you wanted to have a taste of city life yourself? Can your Mother Nature give you that?

Villager: We will discuss this matter with our village head and then let you know about our decision.

Boss: Take your time! The villagers convene to talk.

Village Head: I say we accept this man's offer.

Villager 1: That's right! What a change it would bring to our village. We will get electricity and fuel which will make our work more efficient.

Villager 2: With their water supply we don't have to go all the way to the river to collect water!

Villager 3: Most importantly, we'll be part of a city. We will become one among the sophisticated society. Other villages will be jealous of our quick development.

Village Hero: What is wrong with all of you? Don't you realize what all this will result in? There will be development yes, but that will apply only to them. We will lose our homes, animals will lose their habitats, they will dump their toxic wastes in our land and river. We will lose everything! Do you think this man will help you that time?

Village Head: You keep quiet! I am absolutely certain that we won't have to face any such situation!

Villager 1: What is wrong with development? As far as I have heard, development has always brought success to anything!

Villager Hero: But.......

Villager 2: We want growth....... we want development! We want cars!

Villager Hero: But hear me out......

Villager Head: I said keep quiet!

Villager 3: We'll get water and electricity! What is wrong with that?!

The argument continues and.............

Village Head: (to the Village Hero) You seem to continually defy my decision and argue with me. I will not spare you. I therefore order you to leave this village immediately! If you are against our decision then you are no more welcome to be a part of this community! Please Leave!

Villagers chant "Exile Exile Exile..............."

Village Hero: I am leaving. I guess that man has rewarded you handsomely to get the entire village to agree with this plan. I hope it was worth it!

(Hero exits the scene)

Boss: So I guess I can expect a positive reply from the rest of you! If so then please sign on this agreement paper!

The villagers all sign the paper.

Scene 3: (7 years later)

Villager 1: What has become of our village? It feels like I have lost my home.

Villager 2: The gods have desserted us after the destruction of the sacred groves.

Villager 3: Our forests were once home to a variety of rare species like the white tiger, which are completely extinct now since they lost their habitat.

Villager 1: We do not even have a drop of drinkable water. The promised water supply never came!

Villager 2: Our river has also been completely polluted. All the fishes and other creatures are dead and rotting in it. I only see illness and death everywhere. Suddenly the village hero enters the scene. He has now become a highly qualified environmental officer. He has come to arrest Mr. Bhandari (the boss) as his factory was polluting the river with highly poisonous mercury wastes.

Village Hero: Officers! Arrest this man! He is responsible for polluting this water body with highly toxic wastes. The entire village reconciles with the village hero.